

Wm. C. Brown b2 x

THE SLEEP

OF THE

FAITHFUL DEPARTED.

A SERMON.

HAMILTON, C. W.:

WM. BROWN & CO., BOOKSELLERS & STATIONERS, JAMES STREET.
DONNELLEY & LAWSON, PRINTERS,

1863.

3171

THE SLEEP OF THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED.

"I would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."—1 THESS. iv. 13, 14.

ONE great miracle in the new creation of God is this, that death is changed to sleep ; and therefore in the writings of the New Testament we do not read of the "death" of the saints. "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth ; but I go that I may awake him out of sleep."¹ The "bodies of saints which slept arose."² "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."³ "David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep ;"⁴ even in the pelting of the bloody storm, the holy Stephen "fell asleep."⁵ And therefore St. Paul in the text speaks of the saints unseen as of those that "sleep in Jesus ;" and Christians were wont to call their burial-grounds, cemeteries, or sleeping-places, where they laid up their beloved ones to sleep on and take their rest. Let us, therefore, see why we should thus speak of those whom we call the dead.

First, it is because we know that they shall awake up again. What sleep is to waking, death is to the resurrection. It is only a prelude, a transitory state, ushering in a mightier

¹ St. John xi. 11.

² St. Matt. xxvii. 52.

³ 1 Cor. xv. 51.

⁴ Acts xiii. 36.

⁵ Acts vii. 60.

power of life : therefore death is called sleep, to show that it has a fixed end coming. Much as the heathen felt after this, and mused, and boded, yet, after all, death and the world of the dead was to them a dreary night. They saw men going down into the dust, but they saw none come back again ; they had heard no whispers of the resurrection of the body. If the disembodied spirit should live on, that was all they could attain unto ; but even this was clouded and dim. And their poets were wont to bewail the fleet- ingness of life, and the unknown condition of the dead.— They were wont to say : “Alas, alas, the mallows and the fresh herbs of the field, when they die, return again to life, and spring another year ; but we, the great, the mighty, the wise, when once we die, and are laid in the hollow earth, we sleep a long, an endless, and unbroken sleep !” Even the Jews but dimly saw the coming shadows of the resurrec- tion. Death was too nigh, too mighty, and too absolute ; they saw and felt his dominion. Of his overthrow they had both promise and prophecy ; but as yet he seemed too tyrannously strong to pass away into a transitory sleep. It was for the Gospel to reveal this mystery by the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. It was revealed in act ; and now death is destroyed. It is a kindly soothing rest to the wearied and world-worn spirit ; and there is a fixed end to its duration. There is a waking nigh at hand ; so that the grave is little more than the longest night’s sleep in the life of an undying soul.

Again ; death is changed to sleep, because they whom men call dead do really live unto God. They were dead while they lived this dying life on earth, and dead when they were in the last avenues of death. But after they had once died, death had no more dominion : they escaped as a “bird out of the snare of the fowler : the snare” was “broken,” and they were delivered. It may sound strange to unbelieving ears to say, that we are dead while we live,

and alive when we die. But so it is. Life hangs not on matter, or on the organization of matter. It is not as the harmony which rings out of a cunning instrument ; but it is a breath, a spirit, a ray of the eternal being, pure, immaterial, above all grosser compounds, simple and indissoluble. In the body it is allayed and tempered with weakness, shrouded about with obstructions ; its faculties pent up by a bounded organization, and its energies repressed by "the body of this death." It is life subjected to the conditions of mortality. But, once dead, once dissolved, and the unclothed spirit is beyond the affections of decay. There is no weakness, nor weariness, nor wasting away, nor wandering of the burdened spirit ; it is disenthralled, and lives its own life, unmingled and buoyant. When the coil of this body is loosed, death has done all, and his power is spent ; thenceforth and for ever the sleeping soul lives mightily unto God.

And, once more ; those whom the world calls dead are sleeping, because they are taking their rest. "I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. Even so saith the Spirit : for they rest from their labours." Not as the heretics of old vainly and coldly dreamed, as if they slept without thought or stir of consciousness from the hour of death to the morning of the resurrection. Their rest is not the rest of a stone, cold and lifeless ; but of wearied humanity. They rest from their labors ; they have no more persecution, nor stoning, nor scourging, nor crucifying ; more martyrdoms by fire, or the wheel, or barbed shafts ; they have no more false witness, nor cutting tongues ; no more bitterness of heart, nor iron entering into the soul ; no more burdens of wrong, nor amazement nor perplexity. Never again shall they weep for unkindness, and disappointment, and withered hopes, and desolation of heart. All is over now ; they have passed under the share. The ploughers ploughed

upon their back, and made long furrows ; but it is all over, never to begin again. The rest, too, from the weight of "the body of our humiliation"—from its sufferings and pains. Their last sickness is over. They shall never again bear the tokens of coming dissolution : no more the hollow eye, and the sharp lines of distress, and the hue of a fading loveliness. Now is their weariness changed into refreshment ; their weakness into excellence of strength ; their wasting into a spirit ever new ; their broken words into the perfection of praise ; their weeping into a chant of bliss. And not only so, but they rest also from their warfare against sin, against all its strength, and subtilities, and snares. Satan can tempt no more, the world cannot lure, self cannot betray : they have wrestled out the strife with the unseen powers of the wicked one, and they have won the mastery : there is no more inward struggle, no sliding back again, no swerving aside, no danger of falling : they have gained the shore of eternal peace. Above all, they rest from the buffeting of evil in themselves. It is not persecution, nor oppression, nor the rage of Satan, nor the thronging assaults of temptation, that so afflict a holy man, as the consciousness that evil dwells in his own inmost soul. It is the clinging power of spiritual evil that sullies his whole being : it seems to run through him in every part ; it cleaves to every movement of his life ; his living powers are burdened and biassed by his grasp. Evil tempers in sudden flashes, unholy thoughts shooting across the soul, kindling fires in the imagination, thoughts of self in holiest seasons, consciousness of self in holiest acts, indevoutness of spirit, earthliness of heart, dull musing heaviness in the life of God,—all these burden the highest saint with a most oppressive weight. He feels always the stretch and tension of his spiritual frame, as a man that is weary and breathless grappling with a foe whom, if he would live, he must hold powerless to the earth. But from all this too they rest.—The sin that dwelt in them died, when through death they

began to live. The unimpeded soul puts forth its new-born life, as a tree in a kindly soil invited by a gentle sky: all that chequed it is passed away; all that draws it into ripeness, bathes it with fostering power. Then, at last, shall the bride hear the Bridegroom's voice: "Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away; for, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."¹ The Refiner shall perfect His work upon them, cleansing them seven-fold, even as gold seven times tried; and all the taint and bias of their spiritual being shall be detached and corrected; till, by direct and intense vision, not as now in a glass darkly, but then face to face,—shall they become pure, even as he is pure. Hidden as is the condition of their sleep, may we not believe that they remember us? How much of all that they were must they forfeit, if they lose both memory and love! Shall we think that we can remember Bethel, and Gibeon, and the Valley of Ajalon, and Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives; but that Jacob, and Joshua, and David, and the beloved disciple, remember them not? Or shall the lifeless dust that their feet stood upon be remembered, and the living spirits above that dwelt with them, be clean forgotten? May we not think that they who live unto God, live in the unfolded sameness of personal identity, replenished with charity, and filled with a holy light: they reach backward in spirit into this world of warfare, and onward in blissful expectation to the day of Christ's coming: and in that holy waiting they adore, as the brightness of paradise ever waxes unto the perfect day, when the noontide of God's kingdom "shall be as the light of seven days," and shall stand for ever in a meridian splendour. He hath made His rest to be "glorious;" and there is He gathering in His jewels. There is the multitude of saints, waiting and worshipping: Abel is there, and Isaiah, and Rachel who would not be comforted, and the sonless widow, and Mary Magdalene, and all martyrs, and all the holy ones of God. They

¹ Song of Solomon, ii. 10. 11.

wore out with patience the years of this toilsome life ; and they are resting now. They "sleep in Jesus." Theirs is a bliss only less perfect than the glory of His kingdom when the new creation shall be accomplished.

For these reasons, then, death is changed to sleep ; so that it becomes a pledge of rest, and a prophecy of the resurrection.

And now consider shortly a few thoughts which follows from what has been said.

And, first ; we ought to mourn rather for the living than for the dead. For these six thousand years the whole earth has been full of wailing for the dead. And it was well for the heathen man, when he beheld the clay-cold body of death, to bewail in passionate complaint the change and decay of his beloved ones. But not for us, who dwell in the new creation. If we needs must weep, then let us not weep for the dead, for they are at rest ; but let us weep for the living, for they have yet to die,—and death is terrible. For, after all, death is a strange and awful thing, alien from a living spirit. It is a thing of fear ; full of confused throes, and perturbations, and of shadows cast from the powers of evil. The dissolving of the bands of the flesh is a dark and fearful change, against which nature struggles, and in struggling suffers agony. And the passing of the soul is awful even to the saints. Who can so much as imagine the faintest thought of that fearful going forth of the houseless spirit into the wide world unseen ; or of the first sights and sounds which will throng upon its vivid consciousness ?—What are all the terrors of the night season compared with that hour of fear ? "In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face ; the hair of my flesh stood up : it stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof :

an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying, Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker?" But what is this to the passing of the soul into the piercing eyesight of our Judge? Wherefore let no man weep for the dead: that awful change for them is over. For this end we came into the world. They have fulfilled their task, ours tarrieth.—Almost we are ready to say, Would it were over!—O fearful death! It has a lure which thrills in all my soul, and seems to draw me to itself; it fixes me by the fascination of its dead-cold eye. Death is coming towards me. I must one day die, and "how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" Blessed and happy dead! great and mighty dead! In them the work of the new creation is well nigh accomplished. What feebly stirs in us, in them is well nigh full. They have passed within the veil, and there remaineth only one more change for them—a change full of a foreseen, foretasted bliss. How calm, how pure, how sainted, are they now! A few short years ago, and they were almost as weak and poor as we; burdened with the dying body we now bear about; harassed by temptations, often overcome, weeping in bitterness of soul, struggling, with faithful though fearful hearts, towards that dark shadow from which they shrank as we shrink now.

And, lastly; in very truth, it is life, rather than death, that we ought to fear. For life, and all that it contains,—thought, and speech, and deed, and will—is a deeper and more awful mystery. In life is the warfare of good and ill; in life is the "hour and the power of darkness," the lures and assaults of the wicked one. Here is no rest, no shelter, no safety. What a charge, what a stewardship, is this little fleeting squandered life of man! In every hour of it we are changing for good or ill; ever growing better or worse, nigher or farther from God, nigher to heaven or to hell. Surely, life, with all its powers, capacities, probation, and responsibility, is a thing to tremble at. And yet we are in the midst of

it; and the world is moving on around us, and we are caught and drawn along in its movements, and all our life is gathering itself up for one great cast; and few men know for what. Their life is lived for them. Powers from without shape their character and fixed their doom, and they are dragged along in a bondage of custom, which their fearless trifling with life has made to be irresistible. And who shall not fear the changes and chances of this mortal life? Who, even the most resolved? Between this hour and the hour of death, who can foresee what may befall us? what unknown swervings, what stumblings, what falls? Who can but fear his own heart's treachery? Who but tremble at the awful words uttered by the Church as often as she buries her dead out of her sight—words not less of warning than of prayer, words of depth unutterable: "O holy and most merciful Saviour, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from Thee." Wherefore let us fear life, and we shall not be afraid to die. For in the new creation of God death walks harmless. Christ hath plucked out the sting; and "the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den." All is healed by Him who hath given His own flesh "for the life of the world." Therefore, when at last it comes nigh, we shall behold its darkness pierced every way by rays of a living light, and the gloom of its dread presence softened with the radiance of eternal peace. Even though our last passage be fearful to the flesh, though we be called to follow through the fire of a bodily anguish, still, in the midst of all, and with we know not as yet what gracious visitations to allay our closing struggle,—even as they had of old, who bare witness from the torture and the flame,—we shall fall asleep. Let us therefore be much in thought with them that are at rest. They await our coming; for without us they shall "not be made perfect." Let us therefore remember, and love, and follow them; that when our last change is over, we, with them, may "sleep in Jesus."